

Evaluation of Learning Outcomes:

“Why Does She Stay?” Class Exercise

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Abstract

Attitudes of domestic abuse have been studied for many years. Now researchers look to see if there are ways to change those negative attitudes and have people understand the dynamics of abuse; having more empathy toward the situation and victim. Classroom exercises can be a useful tool to teach empathy. In this study I use the exercise, "Why Does She Stay?" to see if this can be done. In this study, after a pre test, class exercise, and posttest, I found that the class exercise increased the understanding of dynamics of domestic abuse. Females had a greater significant change in their understanding than males did. There was also an age group of 19, 20, and 21 years old had the greatest increase.

Keywords: domestic abuse, violence, teaching, empathy, class, exercise

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Domestic abuse is an epidemic with societal causes and costs. It has been the focus of many studies and people continue to look for new solutions to better people's lives. Domestic abuse can be defined as, "a pattern of coercive and controlling behaviors and tactics by one person to gain power and control over a partner" (Halket, Gormley, Mello, Rosenthal, & Mirkin, 2013). When trying to find prevalence rates, they vary greatly, due to the low response rate for domestic abuse. Many victims will live in silence for years. Prevalence rates range from 11% - 71% (Wang, 2016; Sylaska & Walters, 2014). One aspect being looked at more and more are the attitudes of people towards victims of domestic abuse. Do the attitudes of people have an impact on victims staying or leaving? Studies would say yes; perceptions surrounding domestic abuse do influence the victims in ways such as blaming themselves for the violence that is occurring (Sylaska & Walters, 2014) and therefore victims are less likely to leave the situation. Our attitudes toward domestic abuse also affect how we relate to victims ourselves.

Earlier studies have shown that education could in fact help alleviate some of the victim blaming perceptions that people have toward victims (Latshaw, 2015; Wang, 2016). Fostering empathy, especially in classrooms, can help when talking about situations such as poverty, homelessness, and abuse (Latshaw, 2015).

In this article, I will look at the past research showing reasons why people stay in abusive relationships, victim blaming and gender differences, and take a look at the educational perspectives of this issue. I will look into issues such as teaching empathy and if classroom exercises could aide in that. Finally, after conducting a classroom exercise and pre and posttest surveys I will look at the affect on student's attitudes toward domestic abuse.

Understanding Victim's Reasons

Domestic abuse can happen to anyone; rich, poor, black, white, etc. The reasons that a victim might stay in an abusive relationship are just as varied. What needs to be understood is that no two situations of domestic abuse are the same and every person handles the situations differently. To add to the different variables, research has shown that the most dangerous time for women is after they leave an abusive relationship (Halket et al., 2013). Women will also leave an average of seven times before they decide to leave their abuser for good (Halket et al., 2013; Yamawaki, Ochoa-Shipp, Pulsipher, Harlos, & Swindler, 2012).

One reason may be their lack of financial independence. If a woman does not work on her own and depends on her partner for money, it may be hard for her to afford housing, food, or clothing (Halket et al., 2013; Yamawaki et al., 2012). Even if she works outside of the home, her partner may have control over the money, exerting his power within the relationship. Women on average make eighty percent of what men earn annually (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2016). This gender inequality influences the options that women have at their disposal. If they do not have the financial means, their viable options may be limited. Not having money for medical expenses or attorney fees are major hurdles for victims in the process of leaving.

Lack of resources and support are ongoing issues that could always use more funding. Women looking to leave may put their name on a low income-housing list, but the lists can be very long. A victim could go to a shelter, but you can only stay there for a predetermined amount of time. Family support may also be a determining factor (Yamawaki et al., 2012). Family can side with the perpetrator or encourage the victim to go back. Family may tell the victim that it is their fault and it will happen again unless they change (Meyer, 2015). Even if family is there for support, it can take a toll on those family members to help her and her children. Being in an

abusive relationship you do not want to burn any bridges you do not have to; you may only have a few people you can trust.

Children often play a big role in whether a woman stays or leaves an abusive relationship. Thirty-four percent of children have been threatened with being kidnapped by an abuser (Halket et al., 2013). The court process and decision can also be a deciding factor to leave or not. There have been many cases throughout time that the custody was given to the abusive father, often because he was the breadwinner of the family (Halket et al., 2013). Some women believe it would be safer for their children and her to stay in the home. And most simply, some women just do not understand that there is abuse going on in the relationship.

Gender Differences and Victim Blaming

One of the most studied factors of attitudes regarding domestic abuse is gender of the general public participant. In domestic abuse situations, 90% of the violence in relationships is started by men (Halket et al., 2013). Many findings conclude that men assign more blame to the victim than women (Yamawaki et al., 2012). Another study finds that women tend to perceive domestic abuse as a more serious situation than men (Sylaska & Walters, 2014). In a study of undergraduate students, males with more traditional gender roles are more likely blame the victim (Latshaw, 2015).

The media plays into these gender roles as well. Men are portrayed as incapable of holding their temper and emotions (Halket et al., 2013). Women are portrayed in media as being helpless people who need to act better and her partner will not hurt her. Since women are portrayed this way in media, the stereotypes can play out in places such as court. Many women

are blamed for their own abuse; as if she secretly deserved or wanted the abuse (Halket et al., 2013; Latshaw, 2015).

Even when the victim is trying to get help, they still encounter victim blaming (Meyer, 2015). Criminal justice system agencies, children protection services, medical personnel all have ideas and sometimes lack an understanding of what victims of abusive relationships are going through (Meyer, 2015). And even some women that spoke to a therapist or doctor were not believed (Halket et al., 2013). As a victim, you know there are stereotypes about you, and those stereotypes have an impact on your actions (Meyer, 2015). Many women in an interview study felt they had to overcome the stigma to emerge from victimization (Meyer, 2015).

Teaching Empathy

Domestic abuse can be a tricky issue to talk about or teach. Classes have tried by teaching students to have empathy toward victims, but it can be hard to teach such a skill. Social empathy can be defined as, “the ability to understand people by perceiving or experiencing their life situations” (Adelman, Rosenberg, & Hobart, 2016). For difficult situations and issues to talk about such as poverty and abuse it can be helpful to imagine what it would be like to be a part of that particular group (Adelman et al., 2016). Having educational exercises in a classroom setting can foster discussion, reflection, and knowledge building (Latshaw, 2015). Past research has seen difficulties when teaching a subject such as abuse. Many times statistics, facts, and realities are met with disbelief and defensiveness from students (Latshaw, 2015).

Each student brings with them their own experiences and beliefs to any classroom topic (Adelman et al., 2016). Teachers need to recognize and bring these factors into a conversation. Teachers having guest speakers or having reflection time after these discussions can be affective

when trying to teach about domestic abuse (Latshaw, 2015). Latshaw assessed empathy by using an exercise called "In Her Shoes" (2015). "In Her Shoes" is an exercise about domestic abuse created by the Washing State Coalition Against Domestic Violence (Latshaw, 2015). This exercise gives each participant a role to play such as: victim or perpetrator. Scenarios were played out for both men and women victims (Latshaw, 2015). The participants took a pre and posttest survey and answered open-ended questions. Results showed statistically significant changes in the student's disagreements with victim blaming and growth in their definitions of domestic violence (Latshaw, 2015).

Many pedagogical frameworks focus on perspective taking as a way to foster empathy. Perspective taking can take two forms. 'Imagine other' is imagining how another person would experience a situation. The second form is imagining how one's self would experience the situations (Warren, 2014). Imagining how another person would feel in a situation allows the participant to have a non-egoistic response and understanding (Warren, 2014).

Classroom Exercise

The Center Against Sexual and Domestic Abuse (CASDA) is a non-profit organization in Superior, Wisconsin that helps victims of domestic, sexual, and child abuse. Founded in 1988, it has grown from a staff of three to eleven. Part of their great work, is doing community outreach and prevention. The exercise, known as "Why Does She Stay?" is used in training of staff and interns, in schools, and for community trainings.

During this exercise participants are given a bunch of scenarios to process through. They are also given pieces of paper that represent money (green cards) and assistance (yellow cards). The narrator sets up five places: home, shelter, hotel, apartment, and relative's home. After each

scenario is read, the participants choose which place to go, paying an allotted amount of money or assistance cards at each place. If at any time during the exercise they run out of cards, they must return home.

After the exercise, the narrator facilitates a brief discussion; asking how the participants felt during the exercise and their thoughts on the many scenarios. The participants should understand that while you can try to put yourself in the victim's shoes, it is hard to understand and feel the fear and isolation that the victim would feel.

Participating in this exercise should be done in silence. This allows participants to feel the isolation that the victim may feel; meeting roadblocks such as having to leave shelter or feeling the need to leave a family members house. When in an abusive relationship, you may be isolated so much that you do not have many people to talk to. Even if you find someone, such as a spiritual advisor, they may advise you to stay in the relationship.

The exercise also shows the participants the many criminal justice system roadblocks victims may encounter. Calling the police for help and possibly seeing nothing happen is a real possibility that victims have to weigh out. There is also a fear of having their children taken away by Child Protective Services. The real question, is an exercise like this teaching the participants anything? The hope is that it teaches empathy and understanding of the dynamics of domestic abuse.

Method

Participants were selected due to availability sampling. A Women and Justice class as well as a Psychopathology class were selected for the testing. In total, there were forty-nine students, fourteen of which identified as male and thirty-five identified as female. There were students in these classes with ages ranging from nineteen to twenty-three. Eight students were

nineteen, sixteen student were twenty, fourteen were twenty-one, nine students were twenty-two, and two were twenty-three years or older.

A pre and posttest survey was created and distributed on paper to the students in class that day. A disclaimer about participating was said aloud, stating that participation in the survey and exercise would not influence their grade or standing in the class. The pre and posttest were the same questions (see appendix A). After the disclaimer, the pre test survey was passed out and participants were given as much time as needed to complete the survey. After collecting the surveys, materials were handed out for the exercise, which included the green and yellow sheets of paper. The exercise process was explained and the narrative stated. All scenarios were read through until the exercise was complete. After participants returned to their chairs, the posttest survey was passed out and they were asked to complete it again.

I hypothesized that the index for understanding of the dynamics were higher on the posttest, after the exercise, than the pre test surveys. I also hypothesized women would have a greater change from pre test to posttest regarding the index of understanding the dynamics of abuse. The last tested hypothesis was that younger students (18, 19, and 20) would have less change than participants with an older age of 21, 22, or 23.

Results

I created an index of the questions that signified having a high understanding of the dynamics of domestic abuse. When testing the hypothesis I used an independent samples T test. There was a significant difference between the overall pre test and posttest means for the participants (pre test mean = 2.9498, posttest mean = 3.2557, $p=0.0$).

Females had a high significant positive change in the index (pre test mean = 2.9846, posttest mean = 3.3393, $p = 0.0$). Males had only a moderately significant change in their results

(pre test mean = 2.8626, posttest mean = 3.0824, $p = 0.052$). The most significant age group was 20 years old (pre test mean = 2.8750, posttest mean = 3.3413, $p = 0.0$). Age groups 19 and 21 were moderately significant (pre test mean = 2.9519, posttest mean = 3.2527, $p = 0.045$; pre test mean = 3.0110, posttest mean = 3.2663, $p = 0.053$) respectively. Age groups of 22 and 23 plus were not significant.

When looking at the individual questions, there were some interesting results. "A woman should never go back to her abuser," and "things would definitely improve for a victim if they broke off an abusive relationship," had a high significance at $p=0.00$. The question of "I will be safe once I leave an abusive relationship" was statistically significant ($p=0.004$). The question of "the difference between a victim who would stay or leave an abusive relationship is largely about their personality" was also significant at 0.002. The parenting question of "a mother who doesn't leave an abusive relationship is a questionable parent" had a significance level of 0.001. The mean score for the question, "If I believed a relative was being abused by their dating partner or spouse, I would feel comfortable talking to them about it" was the only question to decrease post test.

Discussion

This class exercise showed positive change in the student's attitudes and understanding of the dynamics of domestic abuse. This significance shows that classroom exercises, such as "Why Does She Stay?" do help as a teaching tool. A survey done in 2014 found that 78 percent of the population still finds it hard to understand why a woman would not leave a domestic abuse situation (Meyer, 2015). Results as shown in this study give a positive outlook on that; people's opinions can be impacted and changed. The middle ages of 19, 20, and 21 had the most significant change. This could help in future forms of classroom exercises to change the format

for different ages. Females had a greater significant change than males. Research has shown that men with more traditional gender role attitudes are more likely to blame the victim (Latshaw, 2015). Focusing on those specific gender roles may be an aspect to consider when talking to a class about abuse.

Looking at the significance of individual questions helps us understand what may be contributing to their overall understanding of the dynamics of domestic abuse. Questions about feeling safe after leaving a relationship and that a woman should never go back to her abuser had high significance levels, seeing some of the greatest change. Believing that being in an abusive relationship may have been because of their personality was a significant change as well. The types of questions that came back significant suggest a broader understanding for the students. The most interesting result was a decrease in the mean for the question asking about how comfortable they would be confronting someone they believed was in an abusive relationship. This exercise caused participants to rethink how confident they were on the subject. Since this exercise decreased their confidence, more teaching or exercises should be done to help them build that advocacy confidence back up.

This exercise was conducted in a criminology class, where some of the students may already have an understanding of domestic abuse. Studies should be conducted at all age ranges, and in classes with different demographics. A small sample size of approximately fifty students hinders the generalizability; therefore larger studies should be conducted with this classroom exercise. When dealing with attitudes on topics, it can be hard to know what each student brings to the exercise. Each group of participants should have time afterwards to debrief and discuss the exercise to get the most out of the exercise.

Conclusion

Domestic abuse is a rampant problem in our society, but it is a topic that can be hard to talk about and teach. Teaching students to empathize with a situation and victim can be difficult; talking about it may not be enough. Teachers have to talk about the victim blaming that victims may feel from people around them, the reasons victims may choose to stay or why they might return to a violent situation. This can be difficult when people bring in their preconceived notions and attitudes about situations and certain people. Classroom exercises can be one way to facilitate a conversation and get people thinking. The classroom exercise of "Why Does She Stay?" was proven to help students understand more about the dynamics of domestic abuse and have empathy toward the situation and victim.

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1. Gender:

- ☐ Male
☐ Female
☐ Other gender identity

2. Age:

- ☐ 18
☐ 19
☐ 20
☐ 21
☐ 22
☐ 23+

Please mark how strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements.

3. If I believed a relative was being abused by their dating partner or spouse, I would feel comfortable talking to them about it.

- ☐ Strongly agree ☐ Sort of agree ☐ Sort of disagree ☐ Strongly disagree

4. A woman should never go back to her abuser.

- ☐ Strongly agree ☐ Sort of agree ☐ Sort of disagree ☐ Strongly disagree

5. I will be safe once I leave an abusive relationship.

- ☐ Strongly agree ☐ Sort of agree ☐ Sort of disagree ☐ Strongly disagree

6. As long as my partner doesn't physically hurt me, it is not considered domestic violence.

- ☐ Strongly agree ☐ Sort of agree ☐ Sort of disagree ☐ Strongly disagree

7. I think my dating partner or spouse should give me a detailed account of what he or she did during the day:

- ☐ Strongly agree ☐ Sort of agree ☐ Sort of disagree ☐ Strongly disagree

8. It is okay for me to tell my partner not to talk to someone of another sex:

- ☐ Strongly agree ☐ Sort of agree ☐ Sort of disagree ☐ Strongly disagree

9. The difference between a victim who would stay or leave an abusive relationship is largely about their personality.

- ☐ Strongly agree ☐ Sort of agree ☐ Sort of disagree ☐ Strongly disagree

10. A mother who doesn't leave an abusive relationship is a questionable parent.

- ☐ Strongly agree ☐ Sort of agree ☐ Sort of disagree ☐ Strongly disagree

11. It is easy to understand how you could continue to love a partner who abused you.

- ☐ Strongly agree ☐ Sort of agree ☐ Sort of disagree ☐ Strongly disagree

12. It is hard for me to understand why a person would stay in an abusive relationship.

☐ Strongly agree ☐ Sort of agree ☐ Sort of disagree ☐ Strongly disagree

13. Things would definitely improve for a victim if they broke off an abusive relationship.

☐ Strongly agree ☐ Sort of agree ☐ Sort of disagree ☐ Strongly disagree

14. I would not judge a person who left an abusive relationship, but then later decided to get back together with that partner.

☐ Strongly agree ☐ Sort of agree ☐ Sort of disagree ☐ Strongly disagree

15. Money pressures are a common reason why someone would stay in an abusive relationship.

☐ Strongly agree ☐ Sort of agree ☐ Sort of disagree ☐ Strongly disagree

16. Check all that you believe counts as domestic abuse.

- ☐ hitting/slapping/punching a partner
- ☐ threatening a partner with violence or harm
- ☐ pressuring a partner into sexual activities
- ☐ controlling a partner's daily activities
- ☐ controlling a partner's financial means
- ☐ preventing a partner from leaving the house